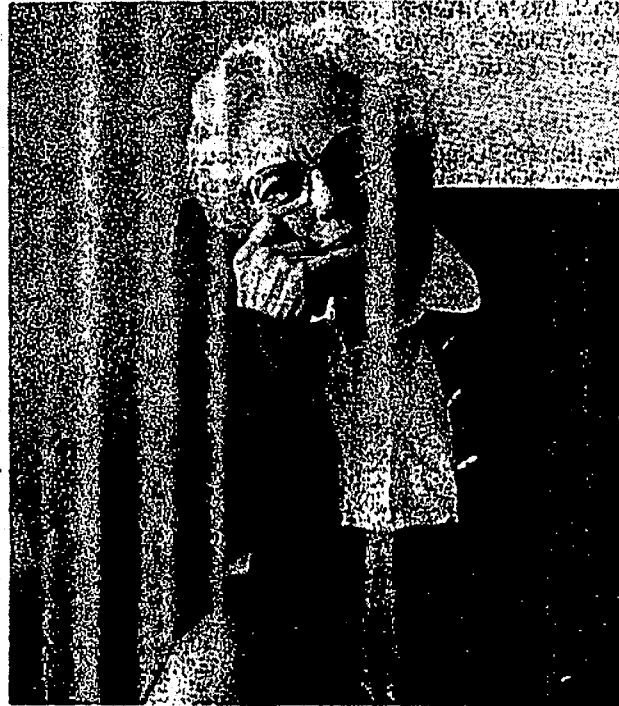


The Clipper Visits...

Helen Hill

By KERRY DWYER



Helen Hill

As a descendant, curious about her family history, Helen (Williams) Hill was drawn to the stack of journals in the family barn which were written by her maternal grandfather, Capt. Edward Baker. Although her father thought reading the journals was an invasion of Capt. Baker's privacy, Hill said, "I was convinced at a very early age that I would read them someday."

Someday came when Hill was 16-years-old. As she read Capt. Baker's journals, the clipper ship era and rural 19th century life came alive. "One day in the attic barn, I started reading them [the journals] out of curiosity," Hill said. "I did feel enough of a tic that I wanted to keep those journals."

"I probably began reading them, although I wasn't conscious of it, because it was a key to my mother's heritage," explained Hill, whose mother died during the flu epidemic of 1918 when Hill was 3-years-old. After

her mother died, Hill lived with her father's family in Taunton and grew up not knowing very much about her mother's family, the Bakers of Duxbury and Marshfield.

With college, graduate school, a teaching career, and 4 children, Hill sporadically read the journals over the years. During the early 1970s, while looking for a scholarly project, Hill, then a professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, thought she would use the journals to concentrate on maritime history. "I didn't start out trying to find about him [Edward Baker]," explained Hill, but, in the end, her focus became Capt. Baker and life on Crooked Lane.

After practically a lifetime of reading, transcribing, and researching, Hill, with the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, recently published *A Proud and Fiery Spirit, Journals of Capt. Edward Baker 1846-1895, Memoirs of Crooked Lane, Duxbury and Marshfield, Massachusetts*, based on her grandfather's writings. On Sept. 17 at 4 pm, Hill and the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society will celebrate the book's publication with a reception and book signing at the King Caesar House.

"To understand the maritime journals, I needed to know about his [Capt. Baker's] family, the villagers, and village life," explained Hill, who delved into genealogical and town records, researched at the Duxbury and Boston Public Libraries, and visited local graveyards. "It became kind of a hobby to find out about these people and that aspect of his life. It turned out to be very interesting."

Hill described her book as "excerpts from his journals woven together with my own narrative." Capt. Baker's journals are a full account of his 13-year career at sea during the height of the sailing era, and his 4 years in the Union Navy during the Civil War. Between voyages, Baker wrote about life in Crooked Lane, which Hill illustrated with old photographs, genealogies, and a portrait she made of her grandfather.

Baker's journals — written from sea, Crooked Lane, and war — give 20th century readers a glimpse into the social history and life of a small, seacoast town. Residents of Crooked Lane, where Temple and Franklin streets meet, were predominantly of English descent. They led ordinary lives as farmers, shoemakers, carpenters, and blacksmiths. Hill said they all shared an "intense interest in friends, neighbors, and families."

"Typical though Crooked Lane was of tiny settlements in New England, with its 1-room school and blacksmith shop and harness shop and slaughter house, its apple-bees and gossip at the corner store which relieved the hard world of planting and haying, and harvesting the farm, Crooked Lane was unique in the details of the lives of the people who lived there," wrote Hill for *Manuscripts* in 1984. "The freshness of these details distinguishes Baker's journals and brings to life many of the community who lived 150 years ago."

Through Capt. Baker's words, Hill has come to see his friends as her own. "Most of them never dreamed of fame or recognition. They were unpretentious; they hoed and planted, baked and sewed, taking such work for granted," Hill said. "They...hunted for mayflowers in the spring and went sliding downhill in the winter. They sang and gossiped, read sentimental novels, discussed politics. They went to church. They fell in love. They took life as it came, always conscious that in the midst of life, we are in death. They were the salt of the earth."

As she researched and read, Hill said, "The more I

worked on it, the more I became interested in it, and I began to see him getting caught up in evangelical religion, the death of Adeline [his sister], and falling in love. It became more his story."

Capt. Baker's story unfolds in the pages of his journals, which he started when he was 14-years-old and kept until 2 weeks before his death in 1895. Baker refers to adolescent escapades with his friends at Brett's Corner Store where they overheard cigar-smoking men talk about women and life. Baker enjoyed the bawdy conversations, and in one journal entry he wrote, "Strange to me it now seems, but no drunkard longed for his regular potations more than I did for this manner of spending an evening. 'Twas society I thought 'twas better than solitude, and we did not have much conversation at home...I longed for excitement, and wherever it could be found, if I could get there, I would go."

Despite his rebelliousness and reputation for being the "worst boy at school," Baker wanted to develop a strong moral character and credits his parents for their strong moral leadership. Hill said her grandfather described himself as a "redhead with a proud and fiery spirit." She added, "He was quick to explode. But he blamed no one but himself...He was concerned with forming his moral character."

"One very dramatic thing is that he grew up very quickly," said Hill of her grandfather. "He was in charge of his own vessel at age 24 and sailed to Archangel, Russia on the White Sea where he got stuck in the ice. They lived dangerous lives and had to take life seriously," Hill added. "By the time her grandfather was 29, he had the maturity and judgment I would give to a man 50-years-old or older."

Capt. Baker's direct, detailed, and reflective writing intrigued Hill. "He wrote directly from the heart...He was a moving writer without pretensions. He's very human and not perfect. He never pretended to be someone he wasn't."

One passage that stood out in Hill's mind was Capt. Baker's recollection of working on Daniel Webster's farm during the summer of 1847. Baker recalled Sylvester Prince, an African-American who led a group of mowers that included Baker and his father. Although Prince sat alone at meals, Capt. Baker wrote in 1882 that he had "...much grace and dignity," and a "...natural nobility under adverse situations."

With her new book fresh off the presses, Hill said, "It is very nice to see it. It looks good. Now I can get back to work on the maritime journals." Her next project is her original project — publishing the story of Capt. Baker's entire maritime career, from ship's boy to captain. Hill said it will be "more complete than other accounts of voyages."

As for how long the maritime journals will take to publish, Hill said, "A year or 2. One year if I work very hard, but these things always stretch out father than you think."